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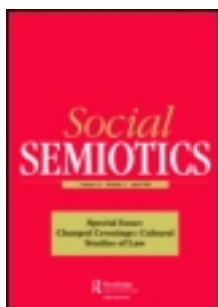
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Conceptual art and language: introducing a logico-semantic analysis

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This article suggests a logico-semantic analysis of Keith Arnatt's Trouser-Word Piece and Victor Burgin's Room, based on Ludwig Wittgenstein's examination of the logical relationship between propositions and the world and M.A.K. Halliday's discussion of social semiotics. It reconsiders the use of language in conceptual art practices from a wider sociological and interdisciplinary perspective, and aims to show how their juxtaposition of different voices within a public context negotiates the space of art as a social space. Focusing on how artworks communicate in context, the following discussion presents the historical as well as the discursive environment in which Arnatt's and Burgin's works are situated and received; moreover, it examines how these works critically manipulate viewing and reading regimes, frameworks of evaluation and patterns of communication in order to create a situation of particular tension between perceptual and conceptual apprehension. In wider terms, this article demonstrates how critically engaged artworks manipulate the conditions of communication by utilizing loan rhetoric (a rhetoric external to the art context) and displace associate meaning in order to challenge the institutionalization of art's production and function. In doing so, they critically stage and contest the power structures that support corresponding hierarchies across producer, audience and mediator, and bring art's social modality into focus. Investigating the manipulation of language in conceptual art, this article proposes a method of analysis that becomes fundamental in studying contemporary multi-modal art production, and in understanding the dialectics of art's communication and critical potential.

Keywords: conceptual art; logico-semantics; word and image; Keith Arnatt; Victor Burgin; social semiotics

*One cannot guess how a word functions.
One has to look at its use and learn from that.
But the difficulty is to remove the prejudice
which stands in the way of doing this.
It is not a stupid prejudice.*

(Wittgenstein 1953, §340; original emphasis)

Introduction

The use of language in conceptual art is often explained as an attempt to replace the art-object and to suppress the esthetic experience of art. Arguing that this attempt failed on both accounts, this consideration is often accompanied by an evaluative distinction between using language as a means to investigate conceptual or perceptual structures

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(something that falls well within the modernist enquiry into art's form and structure) from advancing language as an arguably self-sufficient art form (Buchloh 1990; de Duve 1994; Krauss 1973). Approaching a variety of artistic practices from this binary viewpoint presents two main shortfalls.

First, it rigidifies a particular language for discussing conceptual art. True, the conceptualization of an anti-esthetic impulse in conceptual art helps underline its particular historical context, where modernist art discourse was institutionally advanced as the dominant and best-articulated theory of art, and defended the immediacy and autonomy of esthetic experience as a countermeasure to other forms of socially and politically engaged artistic practice. However, while the history of modernism(s) itself has been reconsidered from socio-political perspectives, and contemporary art's social practices call for diverse interpretations of art's public presence and function, studies of conceptual art often follow a narrow path of analysis. This conflates the critique of the traditional art-object and its institutions (coined under the general rubric of "dematerialization") with a particular interest in language as the prioritization of a strong "conceptual" component. For contemporary art practices, a strong "conceptual" component that has been elevated to an equally autonomous (self-referential or tautological) status forms conceptual art's legacy and becomes a means to establish their relation to discourse as a form of legitimation (Osborne et al. 1997; Osborne 2010).

Second, an ontological distinction between artistic and non-artistic means becomes unattainable in light of a multifaceted contemporary art production in global visual art markets, while (art) writing has been institutionally established as a critical practice. Approaching conceptual art's use of language along this line of enquiry often involves a "linguistic turn," which can be understood as referring to the choice of visual artists to utilize language as well as to the production of increasingly critical texts by artists, which were disseminated in exhibition catalogues and avant-garde art magazines. Indeed, throughout the seventies, the page became a new site for production and experience of art, claiming a space traditionally reserved for art criticism where the binary critical text/photographic reproduction also played out a division of professional labor. Nevertheless, one should keep in mind how attention to language use was not an exclusively artistic phenomenon. From the fifties onwards, the status of language and its relation to moral truth and an infallible state of consciousness was philosophically challenged, and new developments in linguistics, communication studies, and cultural theory contested the one-to-one model of dialogical exchange and marked the power of discourse in language, the organization of knowledge, and social life. Particular to the British context, the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and logical positivism (Ayer, Carnap) shaped critical thinking, along with influences from the French intellectual scene (especially Barthes and Foucault). In the sixties and seventies, critical linguistics developed at the University of East Anglia and the Birmingham Schools of Discourse Analysis and Culture Studies advanced scholarship with influences from M.A.K. Halliday, Basil Bernstein's ([1971] 1973) sociolinguistics, French structuralism, and Marxist theory (Threadgold 2003). By the time conceptual art practices emerged, it became a central premise across the humanities and the social sciences that meaning is created through social processes that are subject to discursive and ideological regimes. Extending this fundamental thesis to the artworld, the refutation of any natural or universal meaning in linguistic or pictorial signs, for example by the use of language, implicated not only the status of art's unmediated and

intuitive experience but also the privileged status of the artist-genius and artistic production.

The lack of discussions on conceptual art and its use of language from a wider sociological and interdisciplinary perspective is evident in the case of canonical (Western) practices as opposed to more adaptable considerations of Latin American or East European activities. Inviting a diverse reading of conceptual art beyond evaluations of a particular type of *modernist* esthetic, this article aims to show how the critical use of language within a public context negotiates the space of art as a social space. It proposes a logico-semantic analysis of two seminal British conceptual artworks, Keith Arnatt's *Trouser-Word Piece* (1972) and Victor Burgin's *Room* (1970), based on Wittgenstein's examination of the logical relationship between propositions and the world and Halliday's discussion of social semiotics. These artworks, the one combining a text with a photograph and the other exclusively utilizing linguistic propositions, create a situation of particular tension between perceptual and conceptual apprehension. As this article argues, they manipulate the conditions of communication by utilizing loan rhetoric (a rhetoric external to the art context) and displace associate meaning in order to challenge the institutional status of the artist. In doing so, they critically stage and contest the power structures that establish reading and viewing regimes and, most importantly, they bring art's social modality into focus.

A logico-semantic analysis considers the relations between signs within linguistic structures at a functional level, and the relations between signs and extra-linguistic objects or relations at the level of social discourse. Rather than investing in some esthetic or anti-esthetic impulse in art, and accepting that artworks have conceptual as much as perceptual significance as long as they have material presence, this article examines the manipulation of language in conceptual art as a paradigmatic starting point in the analysis of the dialectics of art's communication and critical potential. On the one hand, because the attention to context and the implications for meaning was an interest contemporary to conceptual art, an analysis of how the latter communicates in context contributes to the art historical enquiry and helps overcome those binaries that are typically associated with conceptual art (esthetic/anti-esthetic, art/language, artistic sensitivity/pure logic). On the other hand, the emphasis on meaning-making as a social practice allows one to consider art's variable roles across the social field of semiosis (as an art-object, a placeholder for bourgeois values, a social formulation etc.) and becomes fundamental in studying contemporary multi-modal art production. A logico-semantic analysis, therefore, has a wider application, offering a methodology or a basis for a theory of visual communication that explains how artistic practices engage with their audiences and raise concerns beyond the artworld.

This is not to say that the use of language makes an artwork *ipso facto* critical. Rather, the critical currency of a medium or method (the use of found objects, linguistic propositions, public spaces) fluctuates across different historical contexts and institutional settings. For this reason, the work's criticality cannot be deduced to a matter of simply enlisting non-painterly or sculptural means (with reference to conceptual art; non-visual, haptic, affective etc. with reference to contemporary art) in order to make a statement. Rather, it involves a process that dialectically interrelates the object, the viewer, and their communication, and therefore depends on whether the artwork succeeds in securing, albeit provisionally, a procedural method of production that cannot be readily assimilated by the culture industry.

Wittgenstein and Halliday

The opening statements of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, published in 1921, read: "The world is all that is the case" (1) and "The world is the totality of facts, not things" (1.1) (Wittgenstein 2002). Rejecting any vantage point outside language, Wittgenstein sought to interpret the nature of propositions and their relation to the world. For Wittgenstein, to find the general form of proposition also meant to show the limits of language since what could not be generated by this general proposition would be nonsensical and outside the realm of language. As Wittgenstein noted, "The limit will therefore only be capable of being drawn in language, and what lies outside of the limits will be simply nonsense" (2002, 3). Or, as famously written in *Tractatus*: "the limits of *language* [...] mean the limits of *my world*" (Wittgenstein 2002, 5.6.2, original emphasis).

The attention to facts, not things, underlines the importance placed on existence *in a state of affairs* rather than on existence in general. Acknowledging the particularity of the case at hand, the focal point of investigation becomes how things are arranged in language and in the world, and how these two systems correlate. Wittgenstein analyzed language as a system of significant (*Sinvol*) propositions that yield a schematic representation (*Bild*) of the relation between words and facts: "A proposition is a picture of reality: for if I understand a proposition I know the situation that it represents" (2002, 4.021).¹ This means that things exist in a state of affairs *and* convey those logical structures and rules that make them communicable independently of whether they are true or false. Moreover, sense must be determinate (or pre-agreed, *bestimmt*) (Wittgenstein 2002, 3.23). This emphasizes that the evaluation of a proposition as true or false requires that it is answerable to something – for Wittgenstein, this is the world. On the contrary, a proposition for which one can decide whether it is true or false without having to measure it against the world is a tautology, i.e. unconditionally true – for example, "We will leave when we leave."

In the sixties and seventies, developments in linguistics (notably conversational analysis and discourse analysis) and in cultural studies (notably critical discourse analysis) examined language as an instrument of communication and focused on its social and political dimensions, social exchange, and the reproduction of ideology and power.² Accordingly, discourse is a communicative event where conversational participants are doing something else beyond just using language: they interact. Equally, meaning is determined through processes of social interaction. It is important, therefore, to understand language as a social semiotic – a system of information that must be interpreted with reference to its place in the social process of communication, the conventions and assumptions made in this process, and the type and aim of the situation within which it operates (Halliday 1978). Halliday characteristically asks: "How else can one look at language *except* in a social context?" (1978, 10; original emphasis). Likewise, in a communicational exchange, the text (verbal, visual, textual) is not only an instance of linguistic interaction, but a process of sharing – the shared creation of meaning (Halliday 1994, 175). Most importantly, since language is actualized within given social situations where it communicates information about these situations, the patterns of behavior, and habitual thought, it also serves as a vehicle of reality. In that sense, Halliday (2002b) converges with Wittgenstein when he notes that language realizes a world.



Figure 1. “Keith Arnatt winning friends and influencing people at the Hayward’s ‘*The New Art*’” (image caption, *Time Out* 1972, 21). The Tate. ©Keith Arnatt Estate.

Keith Arnatt’s *Trouser-Word Piece* (1972)

Conceptual artworks advanced strategies of re-signification and transposition of signs and meanings across artistic and non-artistic sites, aiming to create an *aporia* of meaning that implicated the status of the object as well as the validity of the viewing and reading modes that help to shape and recognize that object. In the analysis of visual culture, the juxtaposition of images and texts has particular importance, because it brings together not only different modes of communication but also their respective systems of interpretation and evaluation. The photographic part of Arnatt’s *Trouser-Work Piece* was widely circulated on the occasion of the exhibition *The New Art* (17 August–24 September 1972, the Hayward Gallery) as the arrogant face of this new art and the authoritarian yet arbitrary claims of its artists (Figure 1).

The New Art was organized by Anne Seymour, Assistant Keeper of the Tate, for the Arts Council of Great Britain and was envisaged as the first in a series of biennials mapping contemporary art production. Contrary to initial planning, the show focused on selected artists working in mixed media, while a stand with relevant exhibition catalogues, artists’ books, and other publications was available during the show (TNA archives). For its part, the exhibition catalogue featured a dedicated artists’ section – something that was a novelty by the standards of British public galleries but that became characteristic of conceptual art exhibition catalogues by the early 1970s. Paradigmatic of its contemporary interest in philosophy and language, *The New Art* catalogue included Burgin’s analysis of art’s institutional framework with reference to Wittgenstein and French structuralism; Art & Language’s reflections on *Index 02* (1972) with reference to

Morris Weitz; and John Stezaker's analysis of the relation between art and theory from a traditional and analytical perspective. Arnatt's participation included *Trouser-Word Piece* and excerpts from *Art and Egocentricity – A Perlocutionary Act?* (1971), which discussed Grice and Searle.

According to the exhibition's press release, *The New Art* sought to challenge the time-honored notion of art being primarily concerned with beauty and, as the organizer argued, aimed to capture the latest developments in artistic production in Britain, which were more gradual in comparison to other European or American countries (TNA archives; Syemour 1972, 5). This particularity can be explained by the mediatory position of the British art scene between an internationally projected American modernism and distinct European avant-garde movements, and by the changes in national art education and public funding for the arts (Morris 2005; Richards 2003, 462–465; Harrison and Orton 1982; Harrison 1971; Warren Piper 1971). By the mid-sixties, the element of the “new” advanced by the Independent Group became part of Britain's answer to the influence of abstract expressionism (Massey 1995). In 1968, the Arts Council opened the Hayward Gallery as its dedicated exhibition space, thus ending its collaboration with the Tate, and supported the expansion of the Institute of Contemporary Arts. The activities of the ICA become particularly important. Its opening show, *The Obsessive Image 1960–1968*, presented an assembly of new art production across the media, television, and advertisement. In 1969, ICA presented an assembly of the seminal touring conceptual art exhibition *When Attitudes become Form: Works-Concepts-Situations-Information* (28 September–7 October 1969), sponsored by Philip Morris Europe.

For its part, the Hayward's *The New Art* attracted over 13,000 visitors, a total income above £4000, and various shades of public disapproval. For many, the artworks on display were neither “art” nor “new”; others questioned the fairness of the selection process and the Arts Council's policy, and argued that the exhibits, being neither paintings nor sculptures, did not belong in a public gallery, let alone on tax-payers' money (TNA archives). Equally, press reviews claimed that the show's contents were absurd, verbally unintelligible, concerned with linguistics and structuralism rather than with color theories or social evils, and more likely to be informed by Wittgenstein and

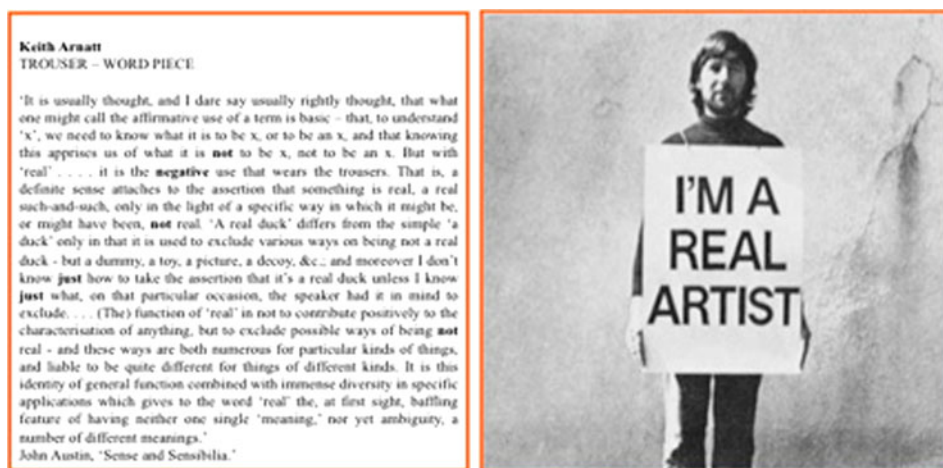


Figure 2. Keith Arnatt, *Trouser-Word Piece* (1972). The Tate. ©Keith Arnatt Estate.

Levi-Strauss rather than by Monet and Manet (Mullaly 1972; “London Art Scene” 1972; Gosling 1972).

Arnatt’s *Trouser-Word Piece* combines a text and a photograph in individually frames of the same size (1005 × 1005 mm) (Figure 2). The text, an excerpt from John Austin’s *Sense and Sensibilia* (1962), discusses how understanding the word “real” entails a process of exclusion that is particular to the specific application of the word “real.” In the photograph, a black and white body portrait, the artist holds a sandwich board that reads “I’m a real artist.” The examination of the logico-semantics of this work begins with an analysis of the latter proposition, and then considers the work’s behavior in context. The central premise in this analysis is that things already exist in a state of affairs that is shaped by conventions and appropriate rules of engagement. This concerns both observation and description. By extension, things are always set in a state of affairs, and talking about them sets them in a state of affairs thus understood. As Wittgenstein emphasized “only in the nexus of a proposition does a name have meaning” (2002, 3.3). In the case of Arnatt’s *Trouser-Word Piece*, this nexus is institutional.

In the photographic part of the work, we read “I’m a real artist.” In the process of communication, the necessary and sufficient conditions of understanding an utterance are knowledge of grammar and vocabulary – that is, knowledge of how the constituent parts of a sentence interrelate and how they relate to the world. Before commencing the analysis of the proposition “I’m a real artist,” let us avoid, momentarily, marked words such as “real” and “artist” and their associated traditions of privileged artistic subjectivity and genius, and consider the structure “X is Y” in a more simple form such as “Sam is a brother.” This utterance could be used to mean that “Sam has two parents who have at least one child other than Sam and Sam is related to that child as being his or her brother.” Notwithstanding, real language users avoid utilizing simple, elementary propositions, because that would impede communication, if not making it impossible. Rather, they rely upon the reassurance that there *are* certain underlying and shared conditions that make a particular meaning possible and they behave so accordingly, expecting that their utterances will be judged as true or false on those conditions. Thus, if one contested the validity of the above proposition by replying that “no, Sam is not a brother”, one could either mean that a) “no, Sam’s parents do not have any other offspring” or b) “no, Sam’s parents do have children, but they are all female.” On the other hand, if the speaker by saying “Sam is a brother” intended to actually say that “Sam is a brother from the ‘hood”” and one tried to verify the truth of the proposition by investigating Sam’s family condition, then interpretation has missed the point. In other words, the conditions of meaning not only depend on situation and context, but also on the form of the proposition (mode, tenor) and the intention of the speaker (Halliday 1978). Finally, this process of analysis also makes clear the methodological distinction between understanding the conditions of communication within a language system from evaluating whether a proposition is plausible or convincing. This becomes particularly important in the discussions of artworks, where the esthetic often functions as both a mode of communication and evaluation.

Returning to Arnatt’s proposition “I’m a real artist”, it can be analyzed into two simpler ones, the first proposing the relation of the object to the world and the second qualifying that relation. Thus, we have the conjunction:

(I am an artist) (real). (I am a real artist)

The first proposition, “I am an artist”, can be logically represented as follows:

$$(Ex)Ix \ \&(\forall x)(\forall y)(Ix \&Iy \rightarrow x = y) \ \& \ (\forall x)(Ix \rightarrow Ax)$$

This reads that there is an “I” that is only one (thus everything else that is qualified as “I” is identical to itself) and for every x instance of that “I” that “I” is “an artist.”³ Here, the necessary conditions that allow one to decide whether this statement is true or false are that an “I” must exist, and that “artist” must be such a characteristic that can be attributed to that “I.” Had this compact statement been presented in a more elementary form, for example “I, Keith Arnatt, the real person whose work is exhibited in an art gallery where artists exhibit their works can be classified as the commonly understood artist – that is, a person who exhibits his works in an art gallery,” analysis would have become redundant.

Extending the study of linguistic structures to their semantic environment, Arnatt’s proposition is presented within an art context by a photograph. This context becomes the measure of the proposition “I am an artist” where the latter communicates based on certain conditions. In this case, these are, I suggest, relevance and symmetry. The condition of relevance is observed when one relates the immediately viewed object to a subject known from contextual vicinity, which can be spatio-temporal or referential. For example, one would relate a numbered tag on a pair of boots found in a shoe shop to the equivalent price of that pair. In the case of Arnatt’s proposition, one understands the “I” to relate to a person called “Keith Arnatt”, either because one recognizes him in the picture or because one recognizes him as the author of the work (for example, as indicated by the caption to the image that refers to the person, Keith Arnatt). Symmetry, or symmetrical transposition, underlines a state of affairs and, as a condition of communication, allows one to draw parallels between the quality of a context and its contents. While the artworld is a particularly mutable environment characterized by shifting financial and ideological interests, the following logical association is nevertheless generally valid: “if this art gallery is a place where artists show their work and Keith Arnatt participates in the show *then* he is an artist.” Combining the conditions of recognition and symmetry, analysis shows why it becomes reasonable to assume that the proposition “I am an artist” can refer to the artist of the work, Keith Arnatt, who participates in an art exhibition such as *The New Art*.

The conjunction of the second propositional component in the photographic part of Arnatt’s work, “real”, can be understood as a qualifier of the relation of the proposition “I am an artist” to the world, as suggested above. Generally speaking, the word “real” entails comparison and knowledge of the relevant state of at least two things. When one says “object A is real and object B is not”, it means that one is in a position to argue about the state of both object A and B. Here, the famous example from Austin involves a rubber duck (see Figure 3), but the word “real” can also be used as an evaluative, for example, “this is a *real* steak.” More specifically to our case, if the word “real” qualifies the relation of the proposition “I am an artist” to the world, it must yield a logico-semantic rule for at least one of the conditions of communication of the latter as explained above, which propose its relation to the world. In the case of relevance, the “real” qualifies “Keith Arnatt” (to whom the “I” of the first clause refers) as a real person. In the case of symmetry, the “real” qualifies the word “artist”, which derives from the logical association that “this is a commonly understood artist *because* artists exhibit their works in an art gallery and the works exhibited in an art gallery are done by artists.” Combining these two aspects in the wider context, Arnatt’s work seems to negotiate

“real” relevance of art on behalf of the viewer and “real” symmetrical transposition of quality on behalf of the art establishment. Finally, recalling from Wittgenstein (2002, 4.0312) that logical constants such as “and” and “or” are not representatives, both conditions become answerable to the world. Thus, in the process of communication, *Trouser-Word Piece* brings into focus how “gallery” becomes the site of qualification of art and “exhibit” the mode.

The second stage of analysis examines the juxtaposition of the work’s textual and photographic parts. The photograph of the artist holding a panel with the proposition “I’m a real artist” is presented next to a frame of same size with an excerpt from Austin. This composition seems to work better in comparison to other formats of presentation such as placing both image and text on the same page, which was considered by the artist (Arnatt 1972), or placing each one on each side of a postcard, which became available at the time (KA archives). Specifically, the selected correlation of image and text challenges the status of the photograph as a neutral or self-evident medium, and is instrumental in the process of hierarchization of meaning. Visually, the work seems to generate a series of interrelated frames. The framed image of the artist, whose subject matter is yet another frame (that of the sandwich board), is located next to a framed text, whose layout is typical for signs or, given the context of art exhibitions, explanatory notes that usually accompany works of art proper. Understanding the frame also defines understanding its content, which is artificially (i.e. visually, materially) separated from its surroundings but which remains conceptually relevant (i.e. artists working within the framework of a gallery system of evaluation and distribution of art).

Finally, turning to the image’s accompanying text, the artist chose the following extract as shown in Figure 3.

Austin’s discussion of the word “real” is an additional correlation point between the text and the framed picture next to it of an artist holding a sign that reads “I’m a real

Keith Arnatt

TROUSER – WORD PIECE

‘It is usually thought, and I dare say usually rightly thought, that what one might call the affirmative use of a term is basic – that, to understand ‘x’, we need to know what it is to be x, or to be an x, and that knowing this apprises us of what it is **not** to be x, not to be an x. But with ‘real’ . . . it is the **negative** use that wears the trousers. That is, a definite sense attaches to the assertion that something is real, a real such-and-such, only in the light of a specific way in which it might be, or might have been, **not** real. ‘A real duck’ differs from the simple ‘a duck’ only in that it is used to exclude various ways on being not a real duck – but a dummy, a toy, a picture, a decoy, &c.; and moreover I don’t know **just** how to take the assertion that it’s a real duck unless I know **just** what, on that particular occasion, the speaker had it in mind to exclude. . . . (The) function of ‘real’ in not to contribute positively to the characterisation of anything, but to exclude possible ways of being **not** real – and these ways are both numerous for particular kinds of things, and liable to be quite different for things of different kinds. It is this identity of general function combined with immense diversity in specific applications which gives to the word ‘real’ the, at first sight, baffling feature of having neither one single ‘meaning,’ nor yet ambiguity, a number of different meanings.’

John Austin, ‘Sense and Sensibilia.’

Figure 3. Keith Arnatt, *Trouser-Word Piece* (1972); detail reconstruction. The Tate. ©Keith Arnatt Estate.

artist.” Specifically, Austin examines the problem of identification through reference and argues that the notion of the “real” communicates on the conditions that, first, one must know by contrast that which is not “real,” and second, one must know what the speaker intends to say by the specific application of the word “real.” A central premise of discourse analysis regarding the meaning-making process as demonstrated by the example “Sam is a brother” is that in order to understand what the speaker is talking about one must know, or at least have some knowledge of, what the speaker talks about. In his analysis, and illustrating his point regarding the use of the word “real,” Austin uses the following metaphor: that it is the negative use of the word that wears the trousers –in other words, that the non-real has the lead in the process of recognition and identification. This metaphor draws on from the text’s social context where the expression “wears the trousers” resides, and in turn creates a parallel between the reading of the text and social behavior. Projected beyond its frame on the gallery wall or on the printed page, the text operates within a social context where hierarchical relations are structured in a certain way that is neither neutral nor natural but maintained by shared beliefs, convention, and force.

As this analysis aimed to demonstrate, *Trouser-Word Piece* exists in a dynamic state of communication that is externally sustained and whose rules of engagement and conventions are critically mirrored and challenged by the work. Thus, how are the words “real” and “artist”, and the image of someone wearing trousers and holding a sandwich board to be understood in this artwork, which exists within the artworld as well as within a wider social context? The work duplicates Austin’s use of a common metaphor in textual and visual terms. However, this process does not simply entail the transfer of a quality of something into a parallel environment, but also contextualizes that quality and shows how it is culturally determined. Put differently, the work does not only compare things (a man, a photograph, a rubber duck). Rather, and more critically, it draws parallels across the act of recognizing objects and their contextual status: recognizing someone as a man, because he is wearing trousers, a street vendor, because he is wearing a sign, and an artist, because he exhibits his works in an art gallery. At this point, one may argue that understanding what the artist is saying does not mean that one has to believe him or accept him as an artist (or his work as art). However, who has to believe it to be true in order for Arnatt to be a real artist? And if he is an artist, does this make this work, the means to convince that its author is a real artist, art? Then again, if one accepts that language embodies social norms, one should also accept that wearing a sandwich board as if he were a street vendor commercializes the artist, since he does, after all, self-promote and sell his art.

Trouser-Word Piece successfully shifts reading and viewing attention not only across the object in question and the subject of its making, but also across the subject of its viewing and the conditions of producing and displaying art. The work can be understood within a hierarchical system of classification and promotion of art, for example a gallery space where visitors recognize and symmetrically transpose institutionalized power structures. Through the work’s critical engagement with its own condition as an art exhibit, “real” becomes a relevant notion polarized between those who potentially make a real selection of art (the art dealer? the public? funding bodies for the arts?) and those who contest this process, as Keith Arnatt may be doing or as the viewer is encouraged to do. By extension, the work prompts one to question how it could be for an artist *not* to exhibit his or her work in an art gallery and how it could be for the gallery-goer *not* to be a mere spectator who recognizes things. By juxtaposing textual and photographic parts as

well as reading and viewing regimes, Arnatt's work exceeds its material and institutional frame and comes into dialogue with the social space that surrounds it. Or better, it dialogically engages the gallery space *as* a social space. No doubt, when the photographic part of *Trouser-Word Piece* is isolated and circulated as the arrogant face of a new type of artist – the conceptual artist – the work's self-critical engagement with its constituted parts, the co-text, and the reader/viewer is suppressed and replaced by a celebratory affirmation of both the art-object and the artist. For his part, and exceeding the institutional and physical confinement of art in galleries, the artist took his iconic portrait to the streets, appearing with the signboard reading "I'm a real artist" in public spaces and outside art institutions (*Live in Your Head* 2000, 2).

Victor Burgin's *Room* (1970)

Critically engaged conceptual art practices brought to the surface and interrogated those qualities of art that were held self-evident and reproduced by institutional discourse and market behavior. They involved reflections not only on form and spatial context, but also on other social practices that were, overtly or covertly, interrelated with the processes of production, promotion, and theorization of art. In this sense, conceptual art's concerns did not only engage art's esthetic, but also its rhetoric. To better understand what art's rhetoric can mean and how it was formulated as a conceptualization of one of art's multiple aspects, one can analyze how conceptual art implicated the language used to talk about art within general social formulations, as well as the artwork's own voice – for example, by considering a text-based work. Comparing textual artworks and artworks that juxtapose image and text allows us to examine different patterns of communication, as well as to check the methodological range of the analysis.

Victor Burgin's *Room* consists of 18 numbered propositions and was originally shown at *Idea Structures* (24 June–19 July 1970, Camden Arts Centre) (Figure 4). Organized by Charles Harrison for the Borough of Camden, London as an annual survey of developments in contemporary art, the exhibition took place at the Camden Arts Centre and the local library at Swiss Cottage (a 15-minute walk away). Exhibits were presented in conjunction with relevant catalogue entries and, in retrospect, the organizer notes how he "naively envisaged [it] as a representation of the hard-line in conceptual art" (Harrison 2002, 223). Burgin's work exclusively filled the center's biggest room. Its propositions were individually reproduced on 280 × 200 mm paper panels and pasted, as instructed, in order and at equal intervals around an "otherwise empty, white painted room (starting to the right of the entrance and finishing to the left)" (*Conception* 2001, 38). As Harrison recalls, "You came into the gallery and it just looked as if there was nothing in there at all" (2011, 30). *Room* was also shown at *The New Art* on a panel with other propositional works by Burgin that explored the relations across signification, position, and experience (see VB Archives; Burgin 1973). It was bought by the Tate in 1973, while the Arts Council of Great Britain bought *Performative-Narrative Piece* (1971) in 1973 and *This Position* (1969) in 1974. These and later works by Burgin negotiate the semiotic and ideological functions of signs across viewing subjects and viewed objects, and contest the ideological division between the inside and the outside of the gallery (Burgin 1986). In his text "Margin Note", included in *The New Art* exhibition catalogue, Burgin discusses the institutional legitimization of art as something singular, concrete, and independent of human

1	ALL SUBSTANTIAL THINGS WHICH CONSTITUTE THIS ROOM
2	ALL THE DURATION OF 1
3	THE PRESENT MOMENT AND ONLY THE PRESENT MOMENT
4	ALL APPEARANCES OF 1 DIRECTLY EXPERIENCED BY YOU AT 3
5	ALL OF YOUR RECOLLECTION AT 3 OF APPEARANCES OF 1 DIRECTLY EXPERIENCED BY YOU AT ANY MOMENT PREVIOUS TO 3
6	ALL CRITERIA BY WHICH YOU MIGHT DISTINGUISH BETWEEN MEMBERS OF 5 AND MEMBERS OF 4
7	ALL OF YOUR RECOLLECTION AT 3 OTHER THAN 5
8	ALL BODILY ACTS PERFORMED BY YOU AT 3 WHICH YOU KNOW TO BE DIRECTLY EXPERIENCED BY PERSONS OTHER THAN YOURSELF
9	ALL BODILY ACTS DIRECTLY EXPERIENCED BY YOU AT 3 PERFORMED BY PERSONS OTHER THAN YOURSELF
10	ALL MEMBERS OF 9 AND ALL MEMBERS OF 8 WHICH ARE DIRECTED TOWARDS MEMBERS OF 1
11	ALL OF YOUR BODILY ACTS AT 3 OTHER THAN 8
12	ALL OF YOUR BODILY SENSATIONS AT 3 WHICH YOU CONSIDER CONTINGENT UPON YOUR BODILY CONTACT WITH ANY MEMBER OF 1
13	ALL OF YOUR BODILY SENSATIONS AT 3 WHICH YOU CONSIDER CONTINGENT UPON ANY EMOTION DIRECTLY EXPERIENCED BY YOU
14	ALL CRITERIA BY WHICH YOU MIGHT DISTINGUISH BETWEEN MEMBERS OF 13 AND MEMBERS OF 12
15	ALL OF YOUR BODILY SENSATIONS AT 3 OTHER THAN 13 AND 12
16	ALL OF YOUR INFERENCES FROM 9 CONCERNING THE INNER EXPERIENCES OF ANY PERSON OTHER THAN YOURSELF
17	ANY MEMBER OF 16 WHICH YOU CONSIDER IN WHOLE OR IN PART ANALOGOUS WITH ANY MEMBER OF 13
18	ANY MEMBER OF 16 WHICH YOU CONSIDER IN WHOLE OR IN PART ANALOGOUS WITH ANY MEMBER OF 12

Figure 4. Victor Burgin, *Room* (1970). Reconstruction. The Tate.

activity, and how language embodies social order, while social institutions impose their own frameworks, which the work's critical and political aim is to reveal (Burgin 1972a).

Burgin's early propositional works such as *Room* have been interpreted as part of the tradition of minimalist sculpture and the historical development of art, formulated by Clement Greenberg, through problem-solving challenges. In the case of *Room*, these challenges included object placement after Robert Morris and an inquiry for a non-geometrical and non-organic form after Donald Judd, to which Burgin responded by using the exhibition room as part of the work and removing the object all together (Burgin 1982, 1997). Artworks often seek to underline the contingency of the physical object by creating situations, drawing attention to space and movement, and prompting the spectator to become aware of her own position. More critically, this interest can expand to the social attitudes that encompass and establish these acts, and seek to uncover the viewing and reading processes that situate art and the habits and ideological interests of recognition. One way of doing this is by turning attention to how linguistic structures set the conditions of apprehension on which esthetic systems are designed (Burgin 1969). In the case of *Room*, a logico-semantic analysis will demonstrate how the work creates a situation where the picture of reality, which it meticulously fabricates, is forcefully measured against those perceptual and conceptual processes that structure reality beyond the artwork. In doing so, *Room* reveals how not only the artwork as an object (and its contents as referential signs) but also the relations that it stages and which are created through its interaction with the viewer/reader exist in a state of affairs (Figure 4).

At a first level of analysis regarding the work's visual, public display, the placement of *Room*'s propositions on small strips of paper around the gallery walls is reminiscent of captions to images that are now, as objects, strikingly absent. Thus, even if the work is considered visually "dry", it does not (and could not) operate on an exclusively linguistic, referential level. Rather, by combining reference in seemingly factual propositions with placement in an institutional space, the work manipulates both its visual allocation and the viewer's reading activity. At the level of content, *Room* interrelates co-text with context in such a way that creates a series of transgressions of the logical and perceptual order of things. The work operates on two fundamental propositions that indicate a total space (proposition (1) "all substantial things which constitute this room") and a total time (proposition (3) "the present moment and only the present moment"). As reading unfolds, consequent propositions demand attention to sensations, recollections, and inferences; to the criteria according to which these can be spatio-temporally distinguished; and reflection on the actions of one's body and of others. Because of the numerical ordering of these propositions and their instructive association, the process of *reading* the work contributes to understanding and developing its structural unity. However, and despite the factual tone of its propositions, the work's unity is sustained by conceptual as much as physical movements across an interpersonal, communal space.⁴ Staged by the propositions' interrelated claims, this movement takes place within the gallery room that now becomes the work's both subject and object, a space of semiotic inscription of conceptual and physical enclosure.

Room's temporal and indexical propositions are structured in a progressive order that both interrelates them and correlates them to the world. As reading progresses, the work exceeds its spatio-temporal parameters and opens up to the world. Consider, for example, proposition (5) "all of your recollection at 3 of appearances of 1 directly experienced by you at any moment previous to 3." While the work has already set the premises of its

apprehension, it now requests recollections and inferences to be made beyond its own structural parameters, drawing attention to other systems such as the architectural composition of the gallery space, the artist's intentions, the viewer's own understanding, social behavior, institutional conventions. In addition, these propositions are articulated in a process of accumulation and exclusion that logically involves deduction of the particular from the general. In linguistic terms, signs are combined according to principles of combination and differentiation; in the case of art, this also involves processes of evaluation and decision-making that *Room* brings to the surface. This is a second transgression of the unity of the work. Even though it may *appear* as advancing an autonomous, stable whole – an evaluation supported by the work's exclusive allocation in the gallery room, austere presence and serial propositional structure – its articulation dialogically engages other systems. At the end, the opening statement (1) “All substantial things which constitute this room” can only be understood in a nexus of meaning that is conceptually, contextually, and institutionally structured.

Room prompts one to realize how even the most naturalized and factual situations or objects can only be tentatively defined. For Burgin, the use of generic language facilitated association across different contexts and display situations (galleries, catalogues, art publications) (Burgin 1972b, 1974). The tendency to linguistic abstraction is well-located within the historical context of conceptual art. Other strategies include the manipulation of common signifying systems from the everyday within their ideological and political contexts – consider, for example, Burgin's *UK 76* (1976) series. However, while the printed multiple page was a typical mode of dissemination of conceptual art, and one that technically did not alter the work's textual nature in reproduction, there is a qualitative difference between a public and a private reading of the work. This involves changes in the connotations and correlations that characterize different contexts, the public interaction of viewer and artwork, and the difference between bodily transposition in the gallery room and the reading movement across the page. Most importantly, there is a shift, as a final transgression, of the public sphere of affairs into a private one. While the work's presence beyond the gallery room can still implicate institutional hierarchies and negotiate different perceptual configurations, the fact that the reader of the reproduction can *own* the page further mystifies the artwork's conditions of production and consumption that are themselves reproduced in multiple copies as factual.

Conclusions

This article examines artworks within the broader cultural and social context, which is historically shaped by social behaviors and institutional policies. While utterances may appear as isolated instances, they are generated within discourse and operate under given frames of reference through the interaction of notational, logical, and social systems. In the case of conceptual art, this frame often relies on the polarity between art's esthetic value and language's logical operations. Yet experiencing art is a social as much as a discursive activity that must be considered within the ideological, economic, social, and cultural milieu. As Halliday (2002a) explains for texts (and, we can add, images), these are actualized within certain discourses where they exist not only by what is said but perhaps most importantly by what is left unsaid. If conceptual art discredited any singular attention on the *object* of art, it did so by bringing into focus the enabling conditions of communication within a wider system of reference, upon which the artwork depends and

rehearses. In their less critical version, conceptual art practices created localized paradoxical instances while ignoring their own conditions and therefore remained limited to them. In their more critical version, they engaged with, or indicated a way of engaging with, the conditions (material, perceptual, institutional) that support things such as the art-object by dialectically shifting attention to the discursive processes of apprehension and evaluation of art.

As a method, the study of the logico-semantic relations of artworks with a visual culture examines their material form, referential content, and variable engagement across different environments. Particular to conceptual art and its use of language, artworks critically manipulated the image/text binary, which reflects the traditional dichotomy mind/body (Mitchell 1987) and arbitrary/universal, and demonstrated how both pictorial and linguistic signs are subject to reiteration, appropriation, and validation as part of the social semiotic. Combining the use of loan rhetoric with formal, visual strategies, works such as *Trouser-Word Piece* and *Room* signal content within a broader cultural context (Roberts 1986). This is not only done at the level of structure or esthetic apprehension, but also at a level where the manipulation of semiotic and semantic codes deconstructs the visual art rhetoric. Put differently, such artworks communicate through processes that challenge percept and concept, the inside and outside of the work, and move across their frame, gallery space, and public sphere. They do so by constructing a picture of reality to which they are both the subject and the object, and which they seek to contest. Bearing the danger of undermining the validity of their own status and artistic licence to do so, they open up the experience and consideration of art to its social context.

Arnatt's *Trouser-Word Piece* reveals the conditions of relevance and symmetry (or recognition and agreement) that make it communicable and the mechanisms of conferring and sustaining artistic value. In a historical context that strongly advocated esthetic experience as a private, unmediated affair among the individual artist-genius, the art-collector, and the bourgeois art-lover, the critical negotiation of the supporting value system of art (by using language, for example) was easily deemed as a passing artistic fancy.⁵ Even so, the work's critique of the institutional setting of art remains valid as long as such hierarchical administrative structures remain in place. In 2002, *Trouser-Word Piece* was acquired by the Tate. Since then, it has been exhibited as part of a tradition that promotes the cult of the artist-celebrity leading up to Tracy Emin (*Self-Evident* 2002); affirming the artist's *real* photographic interests (*I'm a Real Photographer* 2007); or advancing him as a *real* sculptor (*Box, Body, Burial* 2009). In 2010, the artist Savage developed the series *I'm A Fraud* (2010), which engaged with concepts of ownership and rites of exchange, and appeared on the February cover of *an* magazine with a sandwich board that read "I'm a fraud." The self-reflective enquiry of Arnatt's work causes it to oscillate between absurdity and tautology. Responding to a particularly pertinent discussion of its time, *Trouser-Word Piece* would not need to assert its universal, self-evident nature if it really were art; if it needs to do so and be externally and institutionally validated, then it cannot *be* art. However, as the work still reminds the contemporary viewer, this is not (only) a problem of art's ontology but of its definition and use.

In Burgin's *Room*, logically structured propositions shift the perceptual and conceptual order of reading and viewing, and engage the institutional and conceptual framework of art and its experience. This context is expressed in the work itself, rather than being referred to, *and* realized via its formal presentation. Burgin was particularly meticulous about the work's presentation (Harrison 2008), and the conditions of the

work's communication and contextual function can be studied in its different displays (at *Idea Structures* in a room of its own; at *The New Art* alongside other textual works; on the page surrounded by other texts). For Peter Osborne (2002), Burgin's text-works perform a reflective mediation of phenomenological concerns of a post-minimalist art combined with the philosophico-linguistic and set-theoretical problematic of analytical conceptualism. However, whether one perceives the gallery room as part of the work or conceives it as an application, this "otherwise" empty space is also discursively constructed. The work refers to itself, the act of referring to itself, and the conditions of viewing, being, and referring, and demands the presence of the spectator as a requirement for communication. Equally, there is no totality of experience that the work can offer, since it addresses the conditions of viewing/reading as these are perceptually, conceptually, and institutionally defined. Thus, the process of reflection that Burgin's propositions incite is not teleological. Rather than displaying a progressive discovery of appearances, the work reveals a dialectical relation between the physical and discursive environments, wherein both the viewing subject and the viewed object are being formulated.

Using language within a visual art context can be understood as trans-systemic transposition between different notational systems and modes of communication, as well as across their different conceptual and evaluative frameworks, which in turn can draw attention to the meaning of a word, to the meaning of inscribing words, of making pictures, of reading and viewing, of experiencing and reflecting. The negotiation of the bigger picture by a particular artwork is dialectically interrelated to the viewer's understanding not only of that bigger picture but also of the object within that frame in a constant process of transformative recognition and effect. The system of reference determines its constituent parts and constituent parts are thus understood as to fit a given system of reference. By manipulating language, conceptual art shows how, in practice, the dialectics of experience and reflection of art is polarized by the distinction between what finally goes on the gallery wall and what not. This distinction, by being instrumental to the relation between outside and inside the frame of reference, establishes that frame. By the same token, the distinction between the processes of interpretation and evaluation can only be tentative, because what is worth analyzing is based on what has already been understood and therefore deemed worthy of bearing relevant meaning. This means that the esthetic qualifiers of an artwork are also part of its mode of signification and therefore cannot confer exclusive value judgment, not so because judgment comes after experience, but rather because judgment is part of the discursive system of meaning-making and evaluation that *defines* the relation between the "I" and the object, its experience and communication.

If minimalism sought to purge its materials and to indicate not only what one sees but what *can be seen* in front of the viewer, conceptual art counter-suggested that the viewer is unable to look in front of her less she is *not* looking in front of her. Thus, in order to understand the function and critical potential of art in the social space of production, one has to look and see how the artwork generates a chain of signification that implicates its claims and how it negotiates its own status without rendering itself incommunicable or readily available – that is, how well the artwork sustains this *aporia* of meaning. Rather than internalizing the nature of art and celebrating the idea of art, art as idea, or the idea as idea, critically engaged artworks contest both the methodological and ideological constructs that formulate the object in question and, to do so, they must retain an element

of *externality* as they stage their categorical transgression beyond given systems of art, esthetic, or value. Demanding that analysis acknowledges the discursive fields of meaning that are generated by the work in the process of manipulation and challenge of art's frame of reference is conceptual art's legacy as a critical practice.

Notes

1. *Bild*, as the most basic form of representation, is often translated as picture or model. It is also used to refer to the mental representation of a memory, and to what one makes when mapping out an area. Wittgenstein uses different words to describe the relation of a picture to the world. A picture *represents* (darstellen) the situation that would make it true, it *depicts* (abbilden) that reality, and the elements in the proposition *stand in for* (vertreten) the objects in the represented situation (White 2006, 50, 72).
2. Conversational analysis, based on Harvey Sacks' Lecture Notes (1967–72, Department of Sociology, University of California), concentrates on communication at the time of the event. Discourse analysis extends beyond the sentence and considers the overall products of discourse (see Sinclair and Coulthard 1975; Stubbs 1983; Brown and Yule 1984). Critical discourse analysis considers the relations between power and discourse and the patterns of access to (public) discourse for different social groups (van Dijk 1993; Fairclough 1995; Wodak and Meyer 2001).
3. Alternatively, the "I" can be taken as a proper name, as in the example of "Sam," in which case the typology of the proposition reads: A(I). My thanks to Roger White for the indication. However, in the case at hand, the subject of the utterance is not well established or is only tentatively established. This is the starting point of the work's critical engagement with its context and its analysis.
4. The present article discusses the presentation of Room at Camden where referred propositions are not repeated but located in different places inside the room. This is not the case for other occasions of the work's exhibition, and more recently Burgin's retrospective at Fundació Tàpies (2001, Barcelona). In Burgin's words (2013), the selected layout preserves the central line of the work, its 'melody line' as it were.
5. In a text titled "A Passing Fancy?," and a letter to Barbara Reise dated November 1972, Arnatt discussed the relations between what is said and the actions that support it such as public and private goals and values, economic prejudices, social conventions, and – often – a passing fancy (KA archives).

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